

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 BANGKO 23076 031424Z

43

ACTION EA-06

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3669

INFO AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

CINCPAC HONOLULU

DOD WASHDC

S E C R E T BANGKOK 23076

LIMDIS

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MILI, TH, LA, US

SUBJECT: DISPOSITION OF LAO AIRCRAFT

REF: A. STATE 225025; B. BANGKOK 20033

1. IN MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR NOVEMBER 3, FOREIGN MINISTER CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN SAID THAILAND "HAD DECIDED" TO TURN OVER TO LAOS ALL AIRCRAFT CLAIMED BY THE LAO GOVERNMENT. CHATCHAI STRESSED THAT THE SITUATION REGARDING LAOS WAS FAR DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA. IN CASE OF LAOS, THAILAND IS DEALING WITH A GOVERNMENT WITH WHICH, DESPITE A NUMBER OF RECENT PROBLEMS, IT HAS DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS AND BECAUSE OF THE LONG BORDER, HOPES TO HAVE FRIENDLY RELATIONS. IT WAS ESSENTIAL, CHATCHAI SAID, THAT THAILAND NOT COMPLICATE FURTHER ITS ALREADY DIFFICULT RELATIONS WITH THE NEW LAO REGIME. IT WAS THERESORE IMPERATIVE THAT THESE PLANES BE RETURNED TO LAOS. THE NECESSITY OF IMPROVING THAI/LAO RELATIONS OUTWEIGHED ANY OTHER CONSIDERATIONS.

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 02 BANGKO 23076 031424Z

2. IN RESPONSE TO CHATCHAI'S DEMARCHE, THE AMBASSADOR SAID

THAT WHILE THE USG HAD NOT ADVANCED A FORMAL CLAIM TO THESE PLANES, WE VERY DEFINITELY HAD A RESIDUAL INTEREST. THE AMBASSADOR STRESSED THAT NO FINAL DECISIONS SHOULD BE TAKEN AND NO PUBLIC STATEMENTS MADE UNTIL THE U.S. AND THAI GOVERNMENTS WERE ABLE TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEM.

3. CHATCHAI COUNTERED THAT THIS WAS NOT A DECISION ON WHICH THAILAND REQUIRED U.S. APPROVAL. IT WAS THAILAND THAT WOULD HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS DECISION AND THE THAI GOVERNMENT DID NOT NEED U.S. APPROVAL. AFTER SOME FURTHER

EXCHANGE, CHATCHAI RELUCTANTLY AGREED THAT NO PUBLIC STATEMENTS WOULD BE MADE AND NO IRREVOCABLE MOVES TAKEN UNTIL HIS NEXT MEETING WITH THE AMBASSADOR ON NOVEMBER 11. HE STRESSED THAT AT THAT TIME HE WILL EXPECT TO CARRY OUT THE THAI DECISION TO RETURN

TO LAOS THOSE PLANES THE LAO HAVE REQUESTED.

4. CHATCHAI'S HANDLING OF THIS MATTER WAS FIRM AND EMOTIONAL. THIS DEMARCHE UNDERSCORES THE IMPORTANCE OF A PROMPT U.S. DECISION ON OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD PLANES FORMERLY BELONG TO THE RLAF. IT IS OBVIOUS FROM OUR TALK WITH CHATCHAI, WHO IS FEELING HIS OATS AS A RESULT OF HIS SUCCESSFUL MEETING WITH IENG SARY, THAT WE ARE HEADING INTO A MAJOR CONFRONTATION WITH THE RTG ON THIS ISSUE. UNLESS THERE ARE OVERRIDING CONSIDERATIONS OF WHICH WE ARE UNAWARE, WE SERIOUSLY DOUBT THAT IT IS WORTH TAKING ON THE THAI REGARDING THESE PLANES AT A TIME WHEN WE ARE ENTERING DELICATE NEGOTIATIONS OVER OUR FUTURE PRESENCE IN AND RELATIONS WITH THAILAND AND WHEN IT IS OBVIOUS THAT THE LAO ABILITY TO USE AND MAINTAIN THEM IS VIRTUALLY ZERO. WHEN AMBASSADOR ASKED CHATCHAI WHO WOULD PUT THESE PLANES IN CONDITION TO FLY CHATCHAI SAID THAT WAS A LAO PROBLEM.

5. ALTHOUGH WE REGRET SEEING ANY EQUIPMENT RETURNED TO THE LAO, IT WOULD BE OUR RECOMMENDATION THAT GIVEN THE THAIS' UNDERSTANDABLY STRONG STAND WE NOW TREAT THIS AS A THAI/LAO PROBLEM AND LET THEM TRY TO SORT IT OUT. THE ISSUE OF TITLE IS FAR FROM CLEAR AND OUR STICKING ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER THE PLANES WILL BE USED FOR THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH THEY

SECRET

SECRET

PAGE 03 BANGKO 23076 031424Z

WERE ORIGINALLY INTENDED IS OF LESS CONSEQUENCE, AS WE SEE IT, THAN THE SUBSTANCE OF THAI EFFORTS AT RECONCILIATION, UNSUCCESSFUL AS THEY MAY TURN OUT TO BE. ENCOURAGED BY THEIR RECENT TALKS WITH THE CAMBODIANS, THE THAI ARE CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT WORKING SOMETHING OUT WITH THE LAO. IT WILL BE AN ISSUE OF MAJOR CONSEQUENCE IF THESE PLANES STAND IN THE WAY OF SMOOTHING RELATIONS BETWEEN THAILAND AND LAOS. WHITEHOUSE

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NNN

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